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Responding to Literature: accessible texts for reluctant readers

Anita Jetnikoff and Melissa Kelly

The Australian Curriculum: English 5.2 states, across all year level descriptions, that “students engage with a variety of texts for enjoyment”, with the level types of texts and levels of understanding developing over time (ACARA, 2014a). Problems arise when students are unable or unwilling to enjoy texts, and are reluctant to read, view, interpret, and evaluate written texts. This in turn impedes their ability to perform these texts for assessment purposes. The literacy abilities of students can vary widely within a single classroom, and it is a challenge for teachers to source and present texts which are accessible across the spectrum of reading abilities, as well as reflecting themes that are relevant and engaging for students, in addition to being consistent with the General Capabilities and Cross-Curriculum Priorities of the AC:E.

In senior English also, the mainstream Qld Senior Syllabus (QSA, 2010, p. 6) requires that students have learning experiences developed through 15-20 literary texts, including the in-depth study of a complete novel. In the leisure context of English Communications, students may also “write stories, poems, or song lyrics” (QSA, 2004, p. 14). Since students’ responses to literature often take the form of other imaginative text creation we address this in this paper.

We start by offering synopses of some accessible texts and strategies for teachers with these students who are unwilling or low literacy readers in junior secondary and senior level English. This paper canvases some easily read novels and some films with companion text suggestions which may serve as models for students responses. For the junior secondary texts, we identify how these align with the architecture of the Australian Curriculum’s General Capabilities and Cross Curriculum Priorities. Then, we will outline some suitable imaginative responses as possible assessment outcomes, such as short stories and digital stories.

When it comes to composing, the drilling down from the top level structure of the short story into the appropriate language and grammar components are sometimes overlooked. This breaking down needs to be done with all students but especially low literacy students who might find writing even at the sentence level a challenge. To address this we suggest useful print and web-based resources that offer practical strategies for reading the literary works and scaffolding some imaginative written or multimodal responses.








Students are required to compose imaginative texts, often in the form of short stories, of varying lengths depending on year level. The term “short story” in itself is problematic, as it is broad and contextual. If we expect students to compose a short story of 500 words, then it makes sense to deploy models of similar lengths. Students can be reluctant to read stories of 2000 words, and may struggle to understand ways in which they can emulate this text within the set word limit. Further problems arise, as mentioned above, with providing students with accessible texts which investigate engaging themes and content.





In the case of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, teachers can be reluctant to provide culturally reflective texts for students experiencing poverty, homelessness, absent parents, addiction, teen pregnancy, and crime and violence, just to name a few. However, research has shown that young people who see themselves in texts “in terms of race, culture, and lived experiences in the literature they read, they benefit academically, personally and socially”, and it is these same life experiences that provide students with the opportunity to engage academically (Guerra, 2012, p. 388).




Texts produced by students can reflect these same themes, and teachers may encourage them to write what they know, as they draw on their hopes, fears and lived experiences. Reading for pleasure can benefit students through improved literacy, which is directly correlated to academic achievement, as well as developing a better informed perspective of their own lives, and enhancing their understanding and empathy for the lives of other people in different situations (Manuel, 2012, p. 46). An inability to access themes presented in classroom texts can reinforce students’ image of themselves as inadequate readers, perpetuating their reluctance to participate in class and further impeding their opportunities to develop adequate literacy skills (Manuel, 2012, p. 49).



With this as our contextual background, we begin with some suggested accessible texts, though of course this table is by no means exhaustive. Some schools may already be using some of these and others may be useful if teachers and Heads of English are seeking some additions to their school book lists.




General Capabilities Legend:




Literacy  Numeracy  Information and communication technology capability 
 Critical and creative thinking  Personal and social capability 
 Intercultural understanding  Ethical understanding 


Accessible Literature for low literacy or unwilling readers for the Australian Curriculum	
Novel: <i>Holes</i> Sachar, Louis (2000)	Year level suitability: Year 7
Synopsis: This easy to read dystopic, futuristic novel is about persistence, and distortions of the truth. The plot revolves around a group of young misfits who have been incarcerated at 'Camp Green Lake' in an American desert populated by venomous lizards. The mindless occupation of digging holes is the punishment meted out to young miscreants. The central character, Stanley Yelnats, quickly learns the power dynamic of the group, and tries to keep a low profile. He discovers something one day in one of the holes of interest to the brutal and treacherous warden of the camp and the consequences of that are personally damaging to him. He escapes into the desert and survives by finding a water source on a distant hill and another 'lost' boy. When he returns to the camp, a 'treasure' chest has been unearthed which leads to the breakdown of the deception that has been controlling the camp. Keeping people, especially children in such inhumane conditions is not sustainable.	
Suggested Companion Texts: Short Stories: There are a number of short, short stories from the collections <i>No place like home: Australian stories</i> (Dechian, 2005) and <i>Dark dreams: Australian refugee stories</i> (Millar, Sallis, & Dechian, 2004) that express similar themes from the perspective of children feeling trapped in detention and being deprived of human rights including: <i>Kim's story</i> (Huynh, 2004) A biographical recount of her uncle's boat journey to Australia told by a 15 year old Vietnamese girl <i>Urgent request from Baxter Detention Centre</i> (Unknown, 2003) An unconventional narrative of helplessness in the face of authority. Film: <i>Holes</i> (adaptation) (Davis, 2003)	AC:E GCs:   AC:E CCP: <i>Sustainability;</i> <i>Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia.</i>
Novel: <i>Green Tara</i> Brower, K.H. (2013)	Year level suitability: Year 7
Synopsis: Scientist-in-training and neophyte space pilot, Virginia, lives on a space ship colony permanently floating in space, many generations after the earth has been destroyed. She and her cousin, Gordy, break security to fly into a forbidden zone, to the legendary planet Green Tara, which has a sun and gravity, wildlife and oceans much like Earth. As a teenager she discovers a navigation chart marking her mother's last-known destination. Her Green Tara expedition is motivated by searching for her mother who had left when Virginia was just five years old. She discovers that her mother became lost on a science expedition, illegally searching for a planet where colonists could breathe fresh air and drink clean water. Virginia finds her mother. Unfortunately, her mother's mission to recolonise Earth has passed along her ancestral line, and seems more important to her than bonding with her daughter. Their mission is dogged by security agents of the Triumvirate — unwilling to relinquish control of precious natural resources — who track the party down and threaten the mission and the family's freedom. This is a story about what can happen if we do not look after the planet and the importance of human relationships. <i>Green Tara</i> explores the need for taking informed action and caring for each other as well.	
Alternative Short Novel: <i>Refuge</i> (French, 2013) This short, speculative novel is set on a strange, Australian beach which is locked in a time/ space warp. The beach provides refuge for people who have had traumatic experiences and are seeking refuge in a new country. The novel provides a simple allegory for the asylum seeker experience.	AC:E GCs:   AC:E CCP: <i>Sustainability</i>

Novel: <i>The Barrumbi Kids</i> Norrington, Leonie (2002)	Year level suitability: Year 7-8.
Synopsis: Norrington's first young reader's novel demonstrates the complexities of cross-cultural living in a remote community in Northern Territory. The easy to read novel follows the adventures and misadventures of primary school aged Indigenous children as they navigate their way through the blended culture of their community, demonstrating their lived social, cultural and sustainable practices. This novel can be read as a complete novel or episodes can be selected from the stand-alone chapters.	
Suggested Companion Texts: Short Stories: <i>Gami Munjal</i> (Cameron, 2013) Two Indigenous boys scare off an indigenous escapee from the Rottnest Island detention centre by tricking him into thinking a policeman is coming, only to miss the fish and meat he would bring to trade <i>Inmates</i> (Hutchins, 1997) An unlikely alliance forms between two young artists after a shared petty offence and a school excursion to jail.	AC:E GCs:  AC:E CCP: <i>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.</i>
Novel: <i>Boy Overboard</i> Gleitzman, Morris (2002)	Year level suitability: Year 8
Synopsis: This easy-to-read novel explores the serious issues faced by persecuted minorities and refugees, from the point of view of Jamal, a young Afghani boy who dreams of playing soccer for his country. When the government discovers his parents are a small school, and their home is destroyed, the family decide to seek asylum in Australia. Here, Jamal decides, he and his sister Bibi will become soccer stars and return to Afghanistan, change the government, start a national team for both boys and girls, and allow everyone to attend school. However, their journey is complicated as Jamal and Bibi are separated from their parents when they board different boats for the journey to Australia. Jamal and Bibi, along with Rashida and Omar who have also been separated from their parents, endure a difficult journey aboard the boat until they are rescued by the Australian Navy. This novel could be used to demonstrate how a serious issue can be examined from a different point of view. The use of young Jamal to frame the story of seeking asylum indicates the hopes of the people who decide to make a dangerous journey by the only means available to them in the hope of leading a better life free from persecution. The sequel to this, <i>Girl Underground</i> (Gleitzman, 2004), could be read as extension in Year 8, or followed up as a Year 9 text.	
Suggested Companion Texts: Short Stories: <i>Untitled</i> (Wazefadost, 2004) This non-fiction account of persecution of the minority Hazaras by the Taliban and school closures in Afghanistan, gives insight into the serious backstory to the refugee characters in the novel <i>Boy overboard</i> .	AC:E GCs:  AC:E CCP: <i>Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia.</i>
Novel: <i>Trash</i> Mulligan, Andy (2010)	Year level suitability: Year 8
Synopsis: Set in Manilla on a dumpsite, where young people sift through the trash, this novel is a page turning story of survival. The central characters are the dump kids, little more than street kids, but two of them are literate and find a wallet and a letter in a bag whilst sifting through the trash for recyclables. This leads to intrigue which uncovers criminals amongst the police and political corruption in the Philippine government. When the dump kids have to smuggle themselves into a prison to find the 'political prisoner' who is their link to the murdered owner of the wallet, they risk their lives. The story is suspenseful, full of everyday text types such as newspaper reports and letters and would provide a useful springboard to other imaginative writing.	
Suggested Companion Texts: Short Stories: <i>Inmates</i> (Hutchins, 1997) See synopsis under <i>Barrumbi Kids</i> .	AC:E GCs: 

<p><i>An interview with Ali</i> (Bryson, 2004) Young Australian, Sarah-Jane Bryson tells the story of Ali's journey from Afghanistan and his traumatic life under Taliban rule, only to be held in detention in Australia.</p>	<p>AC:E CCP: <i>Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia; Sustainability.</i></p>
<p>Novel: <i>Refuge</i> French, Jackie (2013)</p>	<p>Year level suitability: Year 8</p>
<p>Synopsis: This novel is an interesting blend of magical realism, speculative fiction and the stories of refugees. Young readers will learn much about asylum seekers and the tragic circumstances from which they have come. This tale is set on a beach trapped in time characters from different times and places come together to explore their readiness to leave and join the real world. It explores sustainability in the sense that it explores a 'socially just world through informed action'. Each of the characters in the refuge must decide to leave to face reality. The way we currently treat asylum seekers in this country is unethical and this novel offers an allegorical reflection on the journeys of some of these people.</p>	
<p>Suggested Companion Texts: Short Stories: <i>Waleed Alkhazrajy: Perseverance personified</i> (Aleem, 2004). A biographical account of a university graduate and who escaped persecution in Iraq and his detention as a refugee in Australia. The account questions the treatment of refugees in this country through the eyes of a 17 year old writer. <i>An interview with Ali</i> (Bryson, 2004) See synopsis under <i>Trash</i>. <i>From a small detention centre, I am now in a bigger detention centre: the story of an Afghan refugee</i> (Darab, 2004) A story of escape and detention and feeling trapped even after release from detention.</p>	<p>AC:E GCs:  AC:E CCP: <i>Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia.</i></p>
<p>Novel: <i>The Ink Bridge</i> Grant, Neil (2012)</p>	<p>Year level suitability: Year 8</p>
<p>Synopsis: This novel is about the meeting of two mute boys. The first is a refugee boy, Omed, who escapes Afghanistan, after the Taliban have rendered him silent. Omed undertakes a perilous journey to seek asylum in Australia. Hector is a teenaged Australian boy who has given up on school and retreated into the silence of grief. Their paths cross when they are both working in Hector's uncle's candle factory. But the factory's core business is not just candle making and the hidden crimes of the factory have tragic consequences. Ultimately Hector must act to bring events to a head. Although the coincidences in this story are sometimes too frequent and the plot has some holes, it is an easy read and gives some insight into the terrible world from which asylum seekers are trying to flee.</p>	
<p>Suggested Companion Texts: Short Stories: <i>A refugee</i> (Zia, 2004). A personal narrative of an 18 year old refugee who tells of deprivation of human rights, both in his country of origin and on his harrowing journey to Australia as an asylum seeker.</p>	<p>AC:E GCs:  AC:E CCP <i>Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia.</i></p>
<p>Novel: <i>Girl underground</i> Gleitzman, Morris (2004)</p>	<p>Year level suitability: Year 9</p>
<p>Synopsis: In this comedic novel, Bridget Podger (aka Bridget White) finds herself at an elite boarding school, where her small time criminal parents have sent her to give her better opportunities than they had. Bridget feels marginalised and aligns herself with the bodyguard-protected Menzies, another outsider at the school. Bridget, whose brother is in prison, gets swept up in Menzies' passion for freeing incarcerated refugees, Jamal and Bibi, from a detention centre in the Australian desert. Can they free the young asylum seekers? The backstory of the refugee children's boat journey and their subsequent detention is told in the prequel, <i>Boy Overboard</i>, which we have recommended for year 8.</p>	
<p>Suggested Companion Texts:</p>	<p>AC:E GCs:</p>

<p>Short Stories:</p> <p><i>Broken Hearts</i> (Smith, 2004) This is a biographical account of a young refugee activist like Menzies in <i>Girl Underground</i></p> <p><i>A dozen bloomin roses</i> (Jennings, 2012). This fictional short story, which deals with the tragic effects of marginalisation, has overtones of the supernatural. This story questions the forces the reader to question their assumptions about the narrator.</p>	 AC:E CCP: <i>Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia.</i>
<p>Novel: <i>What now, Tilda B?</i> Lomer, Kathryn (2010)</p>	<p>Year level suitability: Year 9</p>
<p>Synopsis: Tilda Braint is nearly sixteen, restless and having trouble figuring out her next step in life. Living in a small coastal town in Tasmania doesn't seem to offer much opportunity, as everyone knows everyone else, school is full of petty conflict and her family unit has broken down. When a mother elephant seal gives birth to a pup at the local beach and Tilda discovers them, and becomes involved in their care, her life changes irrevocably. Tourists flock to witness the novelty of these marine strangers so far from their usual habitat. The spectacle of the seals unites usually disparate people in the community. Alongside the seal's progress, Tilda's wild best friend, Shell, whose pregnancy parallels the seal mother, is forced to make decisions about her future. The sub-text of Tilda's newly arrived friend Bella, who is a teen mother also features in Tilda's dilemmas about her own relationships with boys. The importance of friendship and discovering 'who you really are' as a young Australian woman are central themes of this moving novel.</p>	
<p>Suggested Companion Texts:</p> <p>Short Stories:</p> <p><i>Turnaround</i> (Wheatley, 1997) When the school book club is visited by a poet, a young blind girl finds herself with an unexpected advantage.</p> <p><i>The impossible Dreame</i> (Griffin, 1997) There's a new girl at school who started the term late and is causing a bit of a fuss. An unconventional narrative told from multiple points of view.</p> <p>Film: <i>Juno</i> (Reitman, 2007) Faced with an unexpected pregnancy while still at school in North America, Juno must navigate the difficult world of adult decision making, and the realisation that being older is not the same as being grown up.</p>	<p>AC:E GCs: Eco-</p> <p>AC:E CCP: <i>Sustainability</i></p>
<p>Novels: <i>Deadly Unna?</i> (1998) and <i>Nukkin Ya</i> (2000) Gwynne, Phillip</p>	<p>Year level suitability: Year 9 and 10</p>
<p>Synopsis: <i>Deadly Unna?</i> is the prequel to <i>Nukkin Ya</i>. Both revolve around the literary young boy, Blacky, who is better at reading than he is at Australian Rules, much to his brutal father's disgust. Set in country South Australia, there is a cultural and racial divide between the Port and the Point. The best player in the team is Dumby Red, from The Point, whose talent potentially offers him a way out of the empty small town existence. The violent events which transpire around Dumby's being overlooked for 'best and fairest player', rock the town's foundations as relationships fall apart and tragedy unfolds.</p> <p>In the sequel <i>Nukkin Ya</i>, Blacky starts to fall for Dumby Red's sister Clarence in defiance of to the town's prying racist eyes and their opposition to cross cultural relationships. The opposition comes from both sides of the families and both are tested.</p>	
<p>Suggested Companion Texts:</p> <p>Short Stories:</p> <p>Extract from <i>Playing by the rules</i> (Clark, 2009) A short, short story about rivalry and perceived betrayal when a school team discovers one of their former members is playing for the opposition.</p> <p>Film: <i>Australian Rules</i> (Goldman, 2002) The film is based on the two Gwynne novel combined.</p>	<p>AC:E GCs: </p> <p>AC:E CCP: <i>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.</i></p>

Film Beneath Clouds Sen, Ivan (<i>Sen</i> , 2001)	Year level suitability: Year 10
Synopsis: Fair-skinned and blue-eyed Lena longs to escape her mundane life with her Indigenous Australian mother in a small country town. She dreams of the life she believes she could lead with her absent Irish father, and decides to escape to Sydney in search of him, as she believes if she stays up with escapee Vaughan, an Indigenous youth desperate to reach his sick mother. Lena endures much of Vaughan's derision in stoic silence, until they get a lift with a group of Indigenous people and one asks Lena about her mob, changing Vaughan's entire approach to his fair-skinned travelling companion. They face many obstacles on the journey to Sydney, and Lena must continue to make tough decisions as they arise, whether to yield to Vaughan's idea of what she should be, or to follow her dream.	
Suggested Companion Texts: Short Stories: <i>The stray</i> (Poulter, 1997) explores an ostracised, troubled youth who is dehumanised by his circumstances and struggles to make emotional connections when he experiences warmth and acceptance.	AC:E GCs:  AC:E CCP: <i>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.</i>
Short Autobiographical texts <i>Hong Kong to Fitzroy Crossing: the road less travelled to a familiar place</i> Bing-Ying Mak, Donna (2012)	Year level suitability: Year 11
Synopsis: The intercultural experiences of a Chinese born doctor, raised in Australia and working and living with the Indigenous people of the remote Kimberly region. Mak's reflections on intercultural understanding and the similarities between Chinese traditional culture and Indigenous culture makes very interesting reading.	
Suggested Companion Texts for models: Short Stories: <i>River fever</i> (Corbett, 2012) A woman born in Africa is now living in the Kimberly. This text could serve as a model short story, as it revolves around a single incident. <i>Leaf</i> (Toussaint, 2012). This models an autobiographical incident based around a symbolic natural object.	AC:E GCs:  AC:E CCP: <i>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia.</i>
Short Autobiographical texts: <i>Journey to freedom</i> Nguyen, Hai-Van (2002)	Year level suitability: Year 12
Synopsis: This powerful and sensitive and short autobiographical essay expounds what happens when humanity is reduced to numbers, as so often happens in the case of war victims and refugees.	
Suggested Companion Texts for models: <i>The tattooist</i> (Vick, 2007) This short, short story shows the limits of "judging a book by its cover" when a Tattooist, proud of overcoming his personal disadvantage to open his own tattoo studio, decides to decline tattooing two inner-city girls that walk into his shop. The tattoo they eventually request opens his eyes to the hardship and disadvantage not always immediately recognisable in a person's appearance. This story provides an excellent model for student learning to "show, not tell."	AC:E GCs:  AC:E CCP: <i>Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia.</i>

Documentary: <i>The finished people</i> Do, Khoa (Do, 2003)	Year level suitability: Year 12
Synopsis: The fictional presentation of the real life issues of the young people in the film as they deal with homelessness, pregnancy, drugs and a bleak existence, and the ways they find to cope with their situation, as well as find hope for their future.	
Short Stories: Suggested Companion Texts: <i>The stray</i> (Poulter, 1997) See synopsis under <i>Beneath Clouds</i> .	AC:E GCs:  AC:E CCP: <i>Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia; Sustainability</i>

Possible Imaginative responses

Year 7:	<p>Students understand how the selection of a variety of language features can influence an audience. They understand how to draw on personal knowledge, textual analysis and other sources to express or challenge a point of view (ACARA, 2014b, p. 14).</p> <p>Using a text such as <i>Holes</i> (Sachar, 2000), in addition to the companion texts suggested, students may compose a creative writing piece in the form of a short story, a memoir or a digital story describing a memory from their childhood.</p>
Year 8:	<p>Students understand how the selection of language features can be used for particular purposes and effects... Through combining ideas, images and language features from other texts, students show how ideas can be expressed in new ways (ACARA, 2014c, p. 2).</p> <p>Students may produce an imaginative response to literature in the form of an online journal or an intervention in the unit's parent text. For example, using <i>Boy Overboard</i> (Gleitzman, 2002), an event from the text could be told from the point of view of Bibi, Rashida or Omar instead of Jamal.</p>
Year 9:	<p>Students understand how to use a variety of language features to create different levels of meaning... In creating texts, students demonstrate how manipulating language features and images can create innovative texts (ACARA, 2014d, p. 22).</p> <p>Students may transform the experiences of characters in the texts they have read about into a different format. For example, if using <i>Girl Underground</i> (Gleitzman, 2004) as the parent text, students could transform the experiences of the characters in that book, or characters of their own making, to reflect the kinds of texts produced by writers in <i>Dark dreams: Australian refugee stories</i> (Millar, et al., 2004).</p>
Year 10:	<p>Students show how the selection of language features can achieve precision and stylistic effect... They develop their own style by experimenting with language features, stylistic devices, text structures and images. (ACARA, 2014e, p. 10)</p> <p>Students may explore the semiotic significance of symbols used in texts, such as in the film <i>Beneath Clouds</i>. They may produce an unconventional short story, digital story or dramatic performance around a chosen symbol.</p>
Years 11 & 12 :	<p>The texts suggested above have been selected for the specific purpose of demonstrating the performance of a short autobiographical text. The text produced by students could take the form of imaginative first person accounts, focussing on a single incident for mainstream English students (QSA, 2010) or a digital story for English Communication students (QSA, 2004).</p>

Teaching resources for engaging reluctant text producers

My Read	This useful website provides excellent reading strategies for middle
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(Years 7-10) myread.org	years, underpinned by a multiliteracies framework.
Write Ways Wing Jan, Lesley (2009)	Chapter 15: Fictional Narratives A functional systemic approach and covers purpose, structure (of conventional short stories) and language features (the grammar of sentences, clauses, adverbial and adjectival phrases and also covers the word level). The chapter also offers teaching focuses, teaching and learning activities including pre-writing and planning phases; which covers useful questions regarding structure, plot, setting and characterisation, and dialogue and concept mapping.
Teenagers and Reading Manuel, Jacqueline and Brindley, Sue (2012)	Chapter 16: Practical strategies for engaging teenagers in reading This chapter provides a range of strategies for engaging readers of different abilities and willingness. Information is presented 4 tables that provide both pedagogical and practical approaches.
Exploring narrative: A guide to teaching The girl who married a fly and other stories Kent, Val (2000)	Chapter 7: More ideas for writing your own stories... and a checklist This chapter provides an extensive list of short exercises to engage readers with the short stories in the anthology, as well as general and accessible ideas for initiating writing. This book also provides activities specific to each story within the collection.
Five senses: 15 short stories Housden, Elli (2009)	A collection of 15 short, short stories which includes read, talk, write, practise and extension activities for each. Suitable for lower secondary.
Writing and Responding: A guide for Senior English Students Housden, Eli (2010)	Chapter 7 covers a guide to the conventional short story, and non-fiction is also covered as well as most of the genres required by current senior work programs in Queensland.
Responding through multimodal approaches at all levels	Audio books or files – sometimes available if schools are using iPads and purchasing novels online. Set up small groups or computers with iPhones or iPads. Reading log can be kept as blogs, voice-threads or audiofiles

We hope this list of texts and resources will be helpful to teachers looking for accessible text and ways to engage reluctant readers in their English classrooms, whilst responding to the new Australian Curriculum, and the current Queensland Senior curriculum.

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